

VZCZCXYZ0011
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBO #0502/01 0402101
ZNR UUUUU ZZH (CCY AD1FF312 TOQ8084-695)
R 092100Z FEB 10
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2693
INFO RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA
RUEHSJ/AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA

UNCLAS BOGOTA 000502

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS
C O R R E C T E D COPY CAPTION
1TFK@STATE.GOV, WHA/CAR FOR V DE PIRRO AND
IO/UNP FOR B NARANJO AND M GARUCKIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [EAID](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: COLOMBIA FIGHTING FOREST FIRES WITH USG HELP

REF: BOGOTA 100; BOGOTA 167

¶1. (U) Summary. Since early January, the USG has assisted the GOC respond effectively to forest fires caused by an atypical lack of rain. Experts expect the fires to spread during a continued drought in February and March. USG assistance to Colombia totals \$650,000, notably \$515,000 of donated U.S. Forest Service funds and equipment. On February 2, a U.S. military cargo plane transported U.S. fire-fighting equipment to Palanquero Air Force Base (a base identified in the Defense Cooperation Agreement). U.S.-donated equipment has reached 88 firefighting teams in the most distressed areas across the country. To date, 716 fires have affected 321 municipalities in 23 of 32 departments, burning an estimated 26,000 hectares. The fires are damaging environmentally-sensitive land such as native forests and highland "paramos." End Summary.
SCOPE OF U.S. ASSISTANCE

¶2. (U) Forest fires that began in late December due to unusually dry conditions from El Niño led the Colombian Ministry of Interior and Justice to issue a departmental and district-level Disaster Decree for 11 departments and Bogota, D.C. on January 8. The GOC requested USG assistance as the fires spread and exceeded the GOC's fire-fighting capabilities.

¶3. (U) The total value of USG firefighting assistance to Colombia is approximately \$650,000. The Ambassador released \$50,000 in Disaster Assistance Authority funds on January 10 to provide technical assistance and provide supplies and equipment to regional firefighting teams (ref A). OFDA gave an additional \$50,000 for the procurement of local supplies, and the U.S. Forest Service provided \$515,000 in funds and fire-fighting equipment and tools.

¶4. (U) A U.S. military cargo plane on February 2 transported U.S. fire-fighting equipment to Palanquero (a base identified in the Defense Cooperation Agreement). National media -- Caracol and RCN -- reported on the delivery of the equipment, which GOC authorities and MILGROUP, the General Services Office, and OFDA distributed to 25 departments and 10 national parks. The Ambassador and the Colombian Minister of Environment highlighted this fire-fighting cooperation on February 4 at an event publicizing ongoing U.S.-Colombia relief assistance to Haiti (ref B). The same plane that transported the firefighting equipment to Palanquero also delivered Colombian humanitarian aid to Haiti.

FIRES POSE THREAT TO CITIZENS, ENVIRONMENT

¶5. (U) As of February 8, the fires have affected 321 municipalities in 23 departments, including southwestern Bogota. There are 15 large-scale fires in the departments of Cundinamarca, Boyaca, Casanare, Tolima, Arauca, and Norte de Santander and four others under control. More fires are expected as the drought season continues through April and May. Drought conditions have generated water shortages in some areas, further complicating fire-fighting efforts. Most of the fires occurred naturally, but some are suspected to have been caused deliberately.

¶6. (U) One such fire has consumed 1,200 hectares of vegetation near the tourist town of Villa de Leyva, including 800 hectares of vegetation in the Iguaque Wildlife Sanctuary that may take 100 years to recover, according to the park's administrator.

¶7. (U) The Ministry of Environment stated that the most threatened areas are Colombia's native forests as well as delicate mountain highlands "paramos" (such as those in Las Hermosas National Park in Tolima and Valle del Cauca and Nevados National Park in Caldas), savannahs, and croplands. Particulate matter in Bogota's air increased by 17% in January over 2009, which Bogota's Environment Secretary attributes in part to the forest fires.

NEW CRISIS ACTION CENTER

¶8. (SBU) The Bogota Director of Firefighters, Mauricio Toro, has requested U.S. assistance with the review of plans and technical recommendations for a new Crisis Action Center. The Bogota firefighting academy is scheduled for demolition next month to make way for a new center, which can better address forest fires and other natural disasters. Construction, which may take one year, is expected to commence soon. The center will first serve the greater Bogota area and will eventually become a national center. Toro offered workspace at the new facility for a U.S. Embassy liaison to assist in any future crises.

BROWNFIELD